

The Immorality of the State

Mikhail Bakunin

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The Theory of Social Contract.

Man is not only the most individual being on earth—he is also the most social being. It was a great fallacy on the part of Jean Jacques Rousseau to have assumed that primitive society was established by a free contract entered into by savages. But Rousseau was not the only one to uphold such views. The majority of jurists and modern writers, whether of the Kantian school or of other individualist and liberal schools, who do not accept the theological idea of society being founded upon divine right, nor that of the Hegelian school—of society as the more or less mystic realization of objective morality—nor the primitive animal society of the naturalist school—take nolens volens, for lack of any other foundation, the tacit contract, as their point of departure.

A tacit contract! That is to say, a wordless, and consequently a thoughtless and will-less contract: a revolting nonsense! An absurd fiction, and what is more, a wicked fiction! An unworthy hoax! For it assumes that while I was in a state of not being able to will, to think, to speak, I bound myself and all my descendants—only by virtue of having let myself be victimized without raising any protest — into perpetual slavery.

Lack of Moral Discernment in the State Preceding the Original Social Contract.

From the point of view of the system which we are now examining the distinction between good and bad did not exist prior to the conclusion of the social contract. At that time every individual remained isolated in his liberty or in his absolute right, paying no attention to the freedom of others except in those cases wherein such attention was dictated by his weakness or his relative strength — in other words, by his own prudence and interest. At that time egoism, according to the same theory, was the supreme law, the only extant right. The good was determined by success, the bad only by failure, and justice was simply the consecration of the accomplished fact, however horrible, cruel, or infamous it might be — as is the rule in the political morality which now prevails in Europe.

The Social Contract as the Criterion of Good and Bad.

The distinction between good and bad, according to this system, began only with the conclusion of the social contract. All that which had been recognized as constituting the general interest was declared to be the good, and everything contrary to it, the bad. Members of society who entered into this compact having become citizens, having bound themselves by solemn obligations, assumed thereby the duty of subordinating their private interests to the common weal, to the inseparable interest of all. They also divorced their individual rights from public rights, the only representative of which — the State — was thereby invested with the power to suppress all the revolts of individual egoism, having, however, the duty of protecting every one of its members in the exercise of his rights in so far as they did not run counter to the general rights of the community.

The State Formed by the Social Contract Is the Modern Atheistic State.

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Now we are going to examine the nature of the relations which the State, thus constituted, is bound to enter into with other similar States, and also its relations to the population which it governs. Such an analysis appears to us to be the more interesting and useful inasmuch as the State, as defined here, is precisely the modern State in so far as it is divorced from the religious idea: it is the lay State or the atheist State proclaimed by modern writers.

Let us then see wherein this morality consists. The modern State, as we have said, has freed itself from the yoke of the Church and consequently has shaken off the yoke of universal or cosmopolitan morality of the Christian religion, but it has not yet become permeated with the humanitarian idea or ethics – which it cannot do without destroying itself, for in its detached existence and isolated concentration the State is much too narrow to embrace, to contain the interests and consequently the morality of, humanity as a whole.

Ethics Identified with State Interests.

Modern States have arrived precisely at that point. Christianity serves them only as a pretext and a phrase, only as a means to fool the simpletons, for the aims pursued by them have nothing in common with religious goals. And the eminent statesmen of our times – the Palmerstons, the Muravievs, the Cavours, the Bismarcks, the Napoleons, would laugh a great deal if their openly professed religious convictions were taken seriously. They would laugh even more if anyone attributed to them humanitarian sentiments, considerations, and intentions, which they have always treated publicly as mere silliness. Then what constitutes their morality? Only State interests. From this point of view, which, with very few exceptions, has been the point of view of statesmen, of strong men of all times and all countries, all that is instrumental in conserving, exalting, and consolidating the power of the State is good – sacrilegious though it might be from a religious point of view and revolting as it might appear from the point of view of human morality – and vice versa, whatever militates against the interests of the State is bad, even if it be in other respects the most holy and humanely just thing. Such is the true morality and secular practice of all States.

The Collective Egoism of Particular Associations Raised into Ethical Categories.

Such also is the morality of the State founded upon the theory of a social contract. According to this system, the good and the just, since they begin only with the social contract, are in fact nothing but the content and the end purpose of the contract – that is to say, the common interest and the public right of all individuals who formed this contract, with the exception of those who remained outside of it. Consequently, by good in this system is meant only the greatest satisfaction given to the collective egoism of a particular and limited association, which, being founded upon the partial sacrifice of the individual egoism of every one of its members, excludes from its midst, as strangers and natural enemies, the vast majority of the human species whether or not it is formed into similar associations.

Morality Is Co-Extensive Only With the Boundaries of Particular States.

The existence of a single limited State necessarily presupposed the existence, and if necessary provokes the formation of several States, it being quite natural that the individuals who find themselves outside of this State and who are menaced by it in their existence and liberty, should in turn league themselves against it. Here we have humanity broken up into an indefinite number of States which are foreign, hostile, and menacing toward one another.

There is no common right, and no social contract among them, for if such a contract and right existed, the various States would cease to be absolutely independent of one another, becoming federated members of one great State. Unless this great State embraces humanity as a whole, it will necessarily have against it the hostility of other great States, federated internally. Thus war would always be supreme law and the inherent necessity of the very existence of humanity.

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Jungle Law Governs Interrelations of States.

Every State, whether it is of a federative or a non-federative character, must seek, under the penalty of utter ruin, to become the most powerful of States. It has to devour others in order not to be devoured in turn, to conquer in order not to be conquered, to enslave in order not to be enslaved – for two similar and at the same time alien powers, cannot co-exist without destroying each other.

The Universal Solidarity of Humanity Disrupted by the State.

The state then is the most flagrant negation, the most cynical and complete negation of humanity. It rends apart the universal solidarity of all men upon earth, and it unites some of them only in order to destroy, conquer, and enslave all the rest. It takes under its protection only its own citizens, and it recognizes human right, humanity, and civilization only within the confines of its own boundaries. And since it does not recognize any right outside of its own confines, it quite logically arrogated to itself the right to treat with the most ferocious inhumanity all the foreign populations whom it can pillage, exterminate, or subordinate to its will. If it displays generosity or humanity toward them, it does it in no case out of any sense of duty: and that is because it has no duty but to itself, and toward those of its members who formed it by an act of free agreement, who continue constituting it on the same free bases, or, as it happens in the long run, have become its subjects.

Since international law does not exist, and since it never can exist in a serious and real manner without undermining the very foundations of the principle of absolute State sovereignty, the State cannot have any duties toward foreign populations. If then it treats humanely a conquered people, if it does not go to the full length in pillaging and exterminating it, and does not reduce it to the last degree of slavery, it does so perhaps because of considerations of political expediency and prudence, or even because of pure magnanimity, but never because of duty – for it has an absolute right to dispose of them in any way it deems fit.

Patriotism Runs Counter to Ordinary Human Morality.

This flagrant negation of humanity, which constitutes the very essence of the State, is from the point of view of the latter the supreme duty and the greatest virtue: it is called patriotism and it constitutes the transcendent morality of the State. We call it the transcendent morality because ordinarily it transcends the level of human morality and justice, whether private or common, and thereby it often sets itself in sharp contradiction to them. Thus, for instance, to offend, oppress, rob, plunder, assassinate, or enslave one's fellow man is, to the ordinary morality of man, to commit a serious crime.

In public life, on the contrary, from the point of view of patriotism, when it is done for the greater glory of the State in order to conserve or to enlarge its power, all that becomes a duty and a virtue. And this duty, this virtue, are obligatory upon every patriotic citizen. Everyone is expected to discharge those duties not only in respect to strangers but in respect to his fellow citizens, members and subjects of the same State, whenever the welfare of the State demands it from him.

The Supreme Law of the State.

The supreme law of the State is self-preservation at any cost. And since all States, ever since they came to exist upon the earth, have been condemned to perpetual struggle – a struggle against their own populations, whom they oppress and ruin, a struggle against all foreign States, every one of which can be strong only if the others are weak – and since the States cannot hold their own in this struggle unless they constantly keep on augmenting their power against their own subjects as well as against the neighborhood States – it follows that the supreme law of the State is the augmentation of its power to the detriment of internal liberty and external justice.

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The State Aims to Take the Place of Humanity.

Such is in its stark reality the sole morality, the sole aim of the State. It worships God himself only because he is its own exclusive God, the sanction of its power and of that which it calls its right, that is, the right to exist at any cost and always to expand at the cost of other States. Whatever serves to promote this end is worthwhile, legitimate, and virtuous. Whatever harms it is criminal. The morality of the State then is the reversal of human justice and human morality.

This transcendent, super-human, and therefore anti-human morality of States is not only the result of the corruption of men who are charged with carrying on State functions. One might say with greater right that corruption of men is the natural and necessary sequel of the State institution. This morality is only the development of the fundamental principle of the State, the inevitable expression of its inherent necessity. The State is nothing else but the negation of humanity; it is a limited collectivity which aims to take the place of humanity and which wants to impose itself upon the latter as a supreme goal, while everything else is to submit and minister to it.

The Idea of Humanity, Absent in Ancient Times, Has Become a Power in Our Present Life.

That was natural and easily understood in ancient times when the very idea of humanity was unknown, and when every people worshiped its exclusively national gods, who gave it the right of life and death over all other nations. Human right existed only in relation to the citizens of the State. Whatever remained outside of the State was doomed to pillage, massacre, and slavery.

Now things have changed. The idea of humanity becomes more and more of a power in the civilized world, and, owing to the expansion and increasing speed of means of communication, and also owing to the influence, still more material than moral, of civilization upon barbarous peoples, this idea of humanity begins to take hold even of the minds of uncivilized nations. This idea is the invisible power of our century, with which the present powers – the States – must reckon. They cannot submit to it of their own free will because such submission on their part would be equivalent to suicide, since the triumph of humanity can be realized only through the destruction of the States. But the States can no longer deny this idea nor openly rebel against it, for having now grown too strong, it may finally destroy them.

The State Has to Recognize In Its Own Hypocritical Manner the Powerful Sentiment of Humanity.

In the face of this fainful alternative there remains only one way out: and that is hypocrisy. The States pay their outward respects to this idea of humanity; they speak and apparently act only in the name of it, but they violate it every day. This, however, should not be held against the States. They cannot act otherwise, their position having become such that they can hold their own only by lying. Diplomacy has no other mission.

Therefore what do we see? Every time a State wants to declare war upon another State, it starts off by launching a manifesto addressed not only to its own subjects but to the whole world. In this manifesto it declares that right and justice are on its side, and it endeavors to prove that it is actuated only by love of peace and humanity and that, imbued with generous and peaceful sentiments, it suffered for a long time in silence until the mounting iniquity of its enemy forced it to bare its sword. At the same time it vows that, disdainful of all material conquest and not seeking any increase in territory, it will put an end to this war as soon as justice is reestablished. And its antagonist answers with a similar manifesto, in which naturally right, justice, humanity, and all the generous sentiments are to be found respectively on its side.

Those mutually opposed manifestos are written with the same eloquence, they breathe the same virtuous indignation, and one is just as sincere as the other; that is to say both of them are equally brazen in their lies, and it is only fools who are deceived by them. Sensible persons, all those who have had some political

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experience, do not even take the trouble of reading such manifestos. On the contrary, they seek ways to uncover the interests driving both adversaries into this war, and to weigh the respective power of each of them in order to guess the outcome of the struggle. Which only goes to prove that moral issues are not at stake in such wars.

Perpetual War Is the Price of the State's Existence.

The rights of peoples, as well as the treaties regulating the relations of the States, lack any moral sanction. In every definite historic epoch they are the material expression of the equilibrium resulting from the mutual antagonism of States. So long as States exist, there will be no peace. There will be only more or less prolonged respites, armistices concluded by the perpetually belligerent States; but as soon as the State feels sufficiently strong to destroy this equilibrium to its advantage, it will never fail to do so. The history of humanity fully bears out this point.

Crimes Are the Moral Climate of States.

This explains to us why ever since history began, that is, ever since States came into existence, the political world has always been and still continues to be the stage for high knavery and unsurpassed brigandage – brigandage and knavery which are held in high honor, since they are ordained by patriotism, transcendent morality, and by the supreme interest of the State. This explains to us why all the history of ancient and modern States is nothing more than a series of revolting crimes; why present and past kings and ministers of all times and of all countries – statesmen, diplomats, bureaucrats, and warriors – if judged from the point of view of simple morality and human justice, deserve a thousand times the gallows of penal servitude.

For there is no terror, cruelty, sacrilege, perjury, imposture, infamous transaction, cynical theft, brazen robbery or foul treason which has not been committed and all are still being committed daily by representatives of the State, with no other excuse than this elastic, at times so convenient and terrible phrase Reason of State. A terrible phrase indeed! For it has corrupted and dishonored more people in official circles and in the governing classes of society than Christianity itself. As soon as it is uttered everything becomes silent and drops out of sight: honesty, honor, justice, right, pity itself vanishes and with it logic and sound sense; black becomes white and white becomes black, the horrible becomes humane, and the most dastardly felonies and most atrocious crimes become meritorious acts.

Crime – the Privilege of the State.

What is permitted to the State is forbidden to the individual. Such is the maxim of all governments. Machiavelli said it, and history as well as the practice of all contemporary governments bear him out on that point. Crime is the necessary condition of the very existence of the State, and it therefore constitutes its exclusive monopoly, from which it follows that the individual who dares commit a crime is guilty in a two-fold sense: first, he is guilty against human conscience, and, above all, he is guilty against the State in arrogating to himself one of its most precious privileges.

State Morality According to Machiavelli.

The great Italian political philosopher, Machiavelli, was the first who gave currency to this phrase (reason of State), or at least he gave it its true meaning and the immense popularity which it has enjoyed ever since in governmental circles. Realistic and positive thinker that he was, he came to understand – and he was the first one in this respect – that the great and powerful States could be founded and maintained only by crime – by many great crimes – and by a thorough contempt for anything called honesty.

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He wrote, explained, and argued his case with terrible frankness. And since the idea of humanity was wholly ignored in his time; since the idea of fraternity – not human, but religious – preached by the Catholic Church had been, as it always is, nothing but a ghastly irony belied at every instant by the acts of the Church itself; since in his time no one believed that there, was such a thing as popular rights – the people having been considered an inert and inept mass, a sort of cannon-fodder for the State, to be taxed impressed into forced labor and kept in a state of eternal obedience; in view of all this Machiavelli arrived quite logically at the idea that the State was the supreme goal of human existence, that it had to be served at any cost, and that since the interest of the State stood above everything else, a good patriot should not recoil from any crime in order to serve the State.

Machiavelli counsels recourse to crime, urges it, and makes it the sine qua non of political intelligence as well as of true patriotism. Whether the State is called monarchy or republic, crime will always be necessary to maintain and assure its triumph. This crime will no doubt change its direction and object, but its nature will remain the same. It will always be the forced and abiding violation of justice and of honesty – for the good of the State.

Wherein Machiavelli Was Wrong.

Yes, Machiavelli was right: we cannot doubt it now that we have the experience of three and a half centuries added to his own experience. Yes, History tells us that while small States are virtuous because of their feebleness, powerful States sustain themselves only through crime. But our conclusion will differ radically from that of Machiavelli, and the reason thereof is quite simple: we are the sons of the Revolution and we have inherited from it the Religion of Humanity which we have to found upon the ruins of the Religion of Divinity. We believe in the rights of man, in the dignity and necessary emancipation of the human species. We believe in human liberty and human fraternity based upon human justice.

Patriotism Deciphered.

We have already seen that by excluding the vast majority of humanity from its midst, by placing it outside of the obligations and reciprocal duties of morality, of justice, and of right, the State denies humanity with this high-sounding word, Patriotism, and imposes injustice and cruelty upon all of its subjects as their supreme duty.

Man's Original Wickedness – the Theoretical Premise of the State.

Every State, like every theology, assumes that man is essentially wicked and bad. In the State which we are going to examine now, the good, as we have already seen, begins with the conclusion of the social contract, and therefore is only the product of this contract – its very content. It is not the product of liberty. On the contrary, so long as men remain isolated in their absolute individuality, enjoying all their natural liberty, recognizing no limits to this liberty but those imposed by fact and not by right, they follow only one law – the law of natural egoism.

They insult, maltreat, rob, murder, and devour one another, everyone according to the measure of his intelligence, of his cunning, and of his material forces, as is now being done by the States. Hence human liberty produces not good but evil, man being bad by nature. How did he become bad? That is for theology to explain. The fact is that the State, when it came into existence, found man already in that state and it set for itself the task of making him good; that is to say, of transforming the natural man into a citizen.

One might say to this that inasmuch as the State is the product of a contract freely concluded by men and since good is the product of the State, it follows that it is the product of liberty. This, however, would be an utterly wrong conclusion. The State, even according to this theory, is not the product of liberty, but, on the

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contrary, the product of the voluntary negation and sacrifice of liberty. Natural men, absolutely free from the point of view of right, but in fact exposed to all the dangers which at every instant of their lives menace their security, in order to assure and safeguard the latter sacrifice, abdicate a greater or lesser portion of their liberty, and inasmuch as they sacrifice it for the sake of their security, insofar as they become citizens, they also become the slaves of the State. Therefore we have the right to affirm that from the point of view of the State the good arises not from liberty, but, on the contrary, from the negation of liberty.

Theology and Politics.

Is it not remarkable, this similitude between theology (the science of the Church) and politics (the theory of the State), this convergence of two apparently contrary orders of thoughts and facts upon one and the same conviction: that of the necessity of sacrificing human liberty in order to make men into moral beings and transform them into saints, according to some, and virtuous citizens, according to others? As for us, we are hardly surprised at it, for we are convinced that politics and theology are both closely related, stemming from the same origin and pursuing the same aim under two different names; we are convinced that every State is a terrestrial Church, just as every Church with its Heaven the abode of the blessed and the immortal gods – is nothing but a celestial State.

The Similarity of the Ethical Premises of Theology and Politics.

The State then, like the Church, starts with this fundamental assumption that all men are essentially bad and that when left to their natural liberty they will tear one another apart and will offer the spectacle of the most frightful anarchy wherein the strongest will kill or exploit the weaker ones. And is not this just the contrary of what is now taking place in our exemplary States?

Likewise the State posits as a principle the following tenet: In order to establish public order it is necessary to have a superior authority; in order to guide men and repress their wicked passions, it is necessary to have a leader, and also to impose a curb upon the people, but this authority must be vested in a man of virtuous genius, a legislator for his people, like Moses, Lycurgus, or Solon – and that leader and that curb will embody the wisdom and the repressive power of the State.

Society not a Product of a Contract.

The State is a transitory historic form, a passing form of society – like the Church, of which it is a younger brother – but it lacks the necessary and immutable character of society which is anterior to all development of humanity and which, partaking fully of the almighty power of natural laws, acts, and manifestations, constitutes the very basis of human existence. Man is born into society just as an ant is born into its ant-hill or a bee into its hive; man is born into society from the very moment that he takes his first step toward humanity, from the moment that he becomes a human being that is, a being possessing to a greater or lesser extent the power of thought and speech. Man does not choose society; on the contrary, he is the product of the latter, and he is just as inevitably subject to the natural laws governing his essential development as to all the other natural laws which he must obey.

Revolt Against Society Inconceivable.

Society antedates and at the same time survives every human individual, being in this respect like Nature itself. It is eternal like Nature, or rather, having been born upon our earth it will last as long as the earth. A radical revolt against society would therefore be just as impossible for man as a revolt against Nature, human society being nothing else but the last great manifestation or creation of Nature upon this earth. And an individual who would want to rebel against society that is, against Nature in general and his own nature in particular – would place himself beyond the pale of real existence, would plunge into nothingness, into an

absolute void, into lifeless abstraction, into God.

So it follows that it is just as impossible to ask whether society is good or evil as it is to ask whether Nature – the universal, material, real, absolute, soul and supreme being – is good or evil. It is much more than that: it is an immense, positive, and primitive fact, having had existence prior to all consciousness, to all ideas, to all intellectual and moral discernment; it is the very basis, it is the world in which, inevitably and at a much later stage, there began to develop that which we call good and evil.

The State a Historically Necessary Evil.

It is not so with the State. And I do not hesitate to say that the State is an evil but a historically necessary evil, as necessary in the past as its complete extinction will be necessary sooner or later, just as necessary as primitive bestiality and theological divinations were necessary in the past. The State is not society; it is only one of its historical forms, as brutal as it is abstract in character. Historically, it arose in all countries out of the marriage of violence, rapine, and pillage – in a word, of war and conquest – with the Gods created in succession by the theological fancies of the nations. From its very beginning it has been – and still remains – the divine sanction of brutal force and triumphant iniquity. Even in the most democratic countries, like the United States of America and Switzerland, it is simply the consecration of the privileges of some minority and the actual enslavement of the vast majority.

Revolt Against the State.

Revolt against the State is much easier because there is something in the nature of the State which provokes rebellion. The State is authority, it is force, it is the ostentatious display of and infatuation with Power. It does not seek to ingratiate itself, to win over, to convert. Every time it intervenes, it does so with particularly bad grace. For by its very nature it cannot persuade but must impose and exert force. However hard it may try to disguise this nature, it will still remain the legal violator of man's will and the permanent denial of his liberty.

Morality Presupposes Freedom.

And even when the State enjoins something good, it undoes and spoils it precisely because the latter comes in the form of a command, and because every command provokes and arouses the legitimate revolt of freedom; and also because, from the point of view of true morality, of human and not divine morality, the good which is done by command from above ceases to be good and thereby becomes evil, Liberty, morality, and the humane dignity of man consist precisely in that man does good not because he is ordered to do so, but because he conceives it, wants it, and loves it.